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International Meeting to Review the Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States

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Agenda item 8
Comprehensive review of the implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States

Summaries of panel discussions

Note by the Secretariat

Addendum

Panel one
Environmental vulnerabilities of small island developing States (Monday, 10 January 2005, 3-6 p.m.)

Summary of discussion prepared by the Co-Chairpersons

1. Panel one addressed the topic of the environmental vulnerabilities facing small island developing States. The panel was co-chaired by Tagaloa Tuala Tagaloa, Minister of Natural Resources and Environment of Samoa, and Marian Hobbs, Minister for the Environment and Associate Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Official Development Assistance) of New Zealand. Klaus Töpfer, Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, moderated the discussion. The four panellists were: Rajendra K. Pachauri, Chairman of the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change; Theophilus Ferguson John, Minister for Physical Development, Environment and Housing of Saint Lucia; Salvano Briceño, Director of the Inter-Agency Secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction; and Kenrick Leslie, Director of the Caribbean Community Climate Change Centre.

2. All panellists and speakers expressed their deepest sympathy to the Governments and people affected by the recent earthquake and tsunami in the Indian Ocean, which resulted in at least 160,000 deaths and widespread destruction of livelihoods and habitats in 13 countries on two continents. In this respect, a message from the President of Maldives, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, was read to the meeting, calling for unity and global partnership to create mechanisms to deal with future environmental calamities (see annex).

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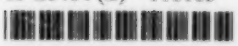

3. The panellists' presentations elicited an interactive dialogue with the Co-Chairs and more than 20 speakers from the floor, including representatives from both small island developing States and non-small island developing States Governments, organizations and civil society. The panel's recommendations are being presented to the high-level round tables to stimulate the intergovernmental dialogue on practical measures to advance the small island developing States agenda, and will be included in the report of the International Meeting.

4. Discussion focused on assessing and strengthening the capacities of small island developing States to manage their environmental vulnerabilities and build their resilience in specific areas, including adaptation to climate change, preparedness and mitigation of natural disasters, promotion of integrated waste management strategies and the development of renewable energy sources. The issues raised and recommendations proposed can be grouped under three main headings, as set out below, along with actions for further consideration.

The environmental vulnerabilities of small island developing States

5. Though diverse in many respects, small island developing States share several common characteristics. Limited physical size, high population density, poor infrastructure and a lack of natural resources, especially freshwater resources, have not only geophysical but also economic and social impacts which are made worse by climate variability and extreme weather events. Coastal populations in all low-lying countries face the risks of sea-level rise, hurricanes, floods and tsunamis; however, in small island developing States these threats are magnified as there is little space or opportunity to relocate people affected or provide alternative livelihoods.

6. The unique features of island ecosystems, including fisheries, coral reefs and mangroves, also face increasing threats from climate changes, natural disasters and unplanned economic growth. This has potentially harmful implications for economic sectors, such as tourism and agriculture, as well as food security and nutrition. A special concern in the Caribbean is the threat of underwater volcanoes in the vicinity of Grenada, as well as the fact that six months of the year the region is susceptible to hurricanes.

7. Many small island developing States are also especially vulnerable to the risk of oil spills because of their proximity to shipping routes carrying large oil tankers and other vessels. Cape Verde and the Comoros, in particular, highlight this problem. Cruise ship discharges are also a threat to beaches and coastal areas as well as fragile ecosystems and coral reefs.

Adapting to vulnerability

8. Many participants emphasized that the vulnerability of small island developing States is not just an environmental issue but has immense social and economic implications, as exemplified by the devastating consequences of many natural disasters that have occurred in the developing world, including the latest tsunami in East Asia. By the same token, the threat of climate change is not only geophysical but also poses grave risks to the social and economic viability of small island developing States.

9. Adaptation to environmental vulnerability and climate change is vital but will force difficult choices and tradeoffs in policy-making, involving, for example, further intensive coastal development or its possible limitation or restriction. In some small island developing States, there is no hinterland and the coast cannot be avoided. The choice is limited to remaining on the island/atoll or not.

10. Even as natural hazards are on the rise, vulnerability is also increasing due to higher poverty levels, unplanned urbanization and environmental degradation. As one speaker observed, "natural hazards are inevitable, but disasters are not". Issues of deforestation and land use in exposing small island developing States to greater natural hazard risks should be considered.

11. The importance of disaster risk-reduction strategies was highlighted. The need to move from post-disaster reaction to building the capacity for prevention was emphasized. A number of participants called for the establishment of early warning and information systems, including at regional and subregional levels. The need for setting up regional climate observation systems to better enable monitoring of climate variations was also mentioned. It was noted that the tsunami that struck East Asia has united the world and created a political momentum that should be used to further expand international cooperation for the development of early warning and information systems within the context of broader disaster prevention efforts. But any such system must be sensitive enough to meet the needs of small States, especially small island developing States.

12. The importance of conserving biodiversity was highlighted. Natural resources accounting systems should be developed, with the assistance of the United Nations system, to address the economic, social and environmental values of ecosystems in an integrated manner.

13. Many participants stressed the importance of partnerships for sharing experience and best practices, the development of technologies and the building of management capacities for vulnerability reduction and disaster management. Small island developing States need the assistance of the international community in building such partnerships and engaging in the development of technologies.

Reducing vulnerability by harnessing renewable energy

14. It was noted that many small island developing States are heavily reliant on imported fossil fuels and that there is a need to develop a range of energy options. There is significant potential for small island developing States to expand the use of renewable energy, selecting those sources that are suited to circumstances of the States concerned. It was also noted that in developing energy options, the limited markets of small island developing States need to be taken into consideration.

15. While a range of renewable energy technologies have been adopted by some small island developing States, further action is required with respect to establishing appropriate and supportive regulatory frameworks and to facilitate the transfer of technology. It was noted that traditional attitudes in the use of energy are a barrier to be overcome in the introduction of renewable energy technologies in small island developing States.

16. Though the share of renewable energy in the overall energy production has increased in many small island developing States, there is still a need to mobilize political support for their further development as an important means of reducing

greenhouse gas emissions and harnessing the potential of natural resources for energy production and the reduction of the high cost of importing energy/fuel. The importance of partnerships between small island developing States in the area of renewable energy was highlighted, as was the scope for cooperation and partnerships in the development of renewable energy technology and the building of the relevant financial, human and institutional capacity of small island developing States.

17. A number of examples were given of renewable energy technologies adopted in small island developing States. In Mauritius, the use of bagasse, long employed by the sugar industry for co-generation, has been expanded to co-fire coal power plants, displacing the use of fossil fuel. The Government of Barbados created incentives to successfully promote the installation of solar hot water systems.

Recommended actions for further consideration

18. Panel one recommends the following actions for further consideration:

- Establish and/or strengthen regional and subregional early warning and information systems.
- Harness the potential of renewable energy as a source of reducing greenhouse gases and meeting the increasing energy demands of small island developing States in a more sustainable manner.
- Build the human, technical and managerial capacities of small island developing States for disaster reduction and prevention, including through international cooperation and partnerships.
- Commit to linking humanitarian and disaster reduction efforts and resources.
- Give special attention to the vulnerability of small island developing States in the upcoming World Conference on Disaster Reduction, to be held in Kobe, Japan, from 18 to 20 January 2005.
- Address the specific needs of small island developing States in the area of vulnerability and natural disasters in order to achieve the goals and targets of the Millennium Development Goals and the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development.
- Integrate disaster-reduction issues into the decisions of the Commission on Sustainable Development at its thirteenth session on water, sanitation and human settlements.

Annex

Message to panel one of the International Meeting dated 10 January 2005 from the President of Maldives, Maumoon Abdul Gayoom

1. On 26 December 2004, we woke up to witness the terrible reality of our environmental fragility. The tsunami created by the Sumatra earthquake that morning swept through the entire archipelago of the Maldives with awesome fury, taking lives, devastating infrastructure, crippling our economy and washing away decades of hard work and toil of our people. This tsunami disaster was indeed, unprecedented — the worst natural calamity and the first of its kind ever experienced in the Maldives.

2. We have now embarked on the formidable tasks of providing emergency relief, rebuilding our lives and livelihoods and reconstructing our nation. These are daunting challenges indeed: 82 people are known to have died and 26 are still missing, and 13 islands had to be completely evacuated. Over 15,000 people have been left homeless and many people are facing food and water shortages. Our tourism and fishing industries have been crippled. Of the 87 resorts, 19 had to be closed. These resorts need major reconstruction to operate again. Many islands lost their fishing boats, ruining their primary livelihood asset. The total damage is estimated at well over one billion United States dollars. As our current focus is on relief and rehabilitation, we have not had the opportunity to asses the impact of the disaster on our fragile environment. The signs, however, are ominous. Our island vegetation is gradually dying as a result of the flooding and intrusion of salt water into the groundwater. This loss of vegetation would further increase the environmental vulnerability of our tiny islands. More importantly, according to scientists, the fresh groundwater reservoirs of our small islands may require several years of rain to recover, replenish and be drinkable.

3. The tsunami disaster is an opportunity for us to reflect on the fragility of small island States and other low-lying coastal areas. It is also a time to make important decisions to avert such catastrophes or minimize the losses of natural disasters in the future. On 26 December, the tsunami waves receded within hours. However, the waves and flooding from sea-level rise triggered by global warming will not recede. The damage then will be unspeakable and we will all become environmental refugees.

4. The Kyoto Protocol will enter into force on 16 February 2005, enabling us to enhance environmental cooperation and achieve targets established for the reduction of greenhouse gases. We need to do more towards the protection of our global environment. The Kyoto Protocol alone is not sufficient to deal with what is a bleak environmental future for our countries.

5. The tsunami disaster has united the world in a way we have not witnessed for a long time. This unity should be harnessed to create mechanisms to deal with future environmental calamities. The calamity has also shown that ecological catastrophes do not stop at national borders and that they are more damaging to small island States. Thirteen countries on two continents were directly affected by the tsunami, and a number of other nations lost their citizens in the disaster.